



Dr. Mateczun's aerial photograph of Lt. Col. Jackson's Medal of Honor action, May 12 1968. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Air Force)

A HERO'S IMAGE: DR. AL MATECZUN AND THE MEDAL OF HONOR PHOTOGRAPH

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Before his career in the Navy, retired captain Dr. Al Mateczun, MC, graduated from the U.S. Air Force Academy in 1964. After pilot training and reconnaissance school at Shaw AFB, tours in France and Idaho, he deployed to Tan Son Nhut AB, Vietnam where he flew 200 missions in the RF-4C Phantom reconnaissance plane.

It is May 12, 1968. At a Special Forces camp in Kham Duc, Vietnam, an Air Force Combat Control Team is sheltered near a fire-swept runway. Surrounded by PAVN [People's Army of Vietnam] forces, they await an inevitable fate of capture or death. As their hope wanes, the unmistakable sound of reciprocating engines is heard over the gunfire, immediately followed by the appearance of Lt. Col. Joe Jackson's C-123 approaching.

Jackson's daring rescue of the Air Force personnel that day would earn him the Medal of Honor. An aerial photograph of his heroic action would be sent to President Lyndon Johnson and later appear in

documentary films and books. Incredibly, this single photograph had long held the distinction of being the ONLY image ever taken of a Medal of Honor recipient and crew performing their gallant deed. (In 2002, drone video footage of Air Force Technical Sergeant John A. Chapman in Afghanistan was used to help substantiate his posthumous Medal of Honor).

For Dr. Al Mateczun it is a photograph he knows well. Long before taking the helm of Naval Medical Research Center's Biological Defense Research Directorate and years before embarking on a career as a Navy medical officer and flight surgeon, Mateczun wore the wings of an Air Force aviator. On that fateful day in 1968, he piloted the reconnaissance plane that took that famous image.

That particular mission had been his 198th in Vietnam. He had been on "in-country" alert when he received target coordinates by radio.

"You didn't have time to plan, you had to scramble the airplane, and it was cocked and ready to go," recalled Mateczun. "The target was a place called Kham Duc, which was on the Cambodian border and served as a Special Forces camp. I didn't know what was happening, but they were being overrun."

The weather had deteriorating rapidly with a thunderstorm to the north of the camp. Mateczun received clearance from the airborne command to target the runway.

"I pulled around and lined up on the runway. They just wanted any camera, any altitude, which they never did; they always wanted a specific scale. I said, 'Fine,' and I went smoking down the runway very fast at about 500 feet off the ground with all the cameras running," said Mateczun. "There was a plane down there, a C-123. I finished the run and then pulled up and had to turn around; they wanted a run from the other direction too. I pulled up into this thunderstorm, which was not fun. I did a 90/270 degree turn 270 degrees back the other way and then I came right back where I started, but in the other direction." I had just got started with that run when a bunch of missiles came down off the hilltop."

On a ridge west of Kham Duc, several missiles were fired at Mateczun's RF-4C *Phantom*.



DAYTON, Ohio — McDonnell Douglas RF-4C Phantom II at the National Museum of the United States Air Force. (U.S. Air Force photo)

“These missiles were just steady on the wind screen, and I said, ‘I don’t like this.’ So, I pulled back on the stick. I think I over-G’d the airplane, but the missiles went right under me and I said, ‘Okay, that’s enough.’ and I went home.”

Command intelligence was anxious to see the photographs and he was later told his aircraft’s photos were the only images received that day.

Dr. Mateczun’s unit would receive three Presidential Unit Citations for their roles on May 12, 1968.

After his tour of duty, Dr. Mateczun returned to the United States where he served as an F-111 instructor pilot at Nellis AFB, Nevada before deciding to leave the service. While attending the University of New Mexico School of Medicine in Albuquerque, Mateczun would receive his commission in the U.S. Navy.

Over the course of his distinguished Navy career, Mateczun would serve as Commanding Officer for the Naval Aerospace Medical Research Laboratory in Pensacola, Fla., and the Naval Medical Research Unit No. 3 in Cairo, Egypt before taking the helm of BDRD.

Today, that photograph and his 200 combat missions are among his proudest memories.

Source

Retired Navy Capt. Al Mateczun, MC, Oral History, conducted January 24, 2017 by A.B. Sobocinski, BUMED Oral History Archives.